

Tres Rios: Everglades in desert

1,500-acre project includes wetlands

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The Phoenix City Council has signed an agreement to launch a \$91 million project in far west Phoenix to create about 1,500 acres of wetlands and a levee that will help to clean drinking water, control flooding and serve as a playground for bird watchers.

The Tres Rios Project, now an 11-acre demonstration project, is home to spindly-legged water birds and looks like a piece of the Everglades in the desert.

In its nine years, the wetlands have attracted observers from Italy, the endangered Yuma clapper rail birds and hundreds of visitors.

In another nine years, the project will mushroom to 1,500 acres of wetlands, other habitats and a pump station in the area stretching from 83rd Avenue to Litchfield Road and Southern Avenue south to where the Gila, Agua Fria and Salt rivers meet.

Last month, the Phoenix council members approved an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers to start the \$91 million project. The city's share is \$18.4 million.

The Tres Rios Project started as a way to clean water from the 91st Avenue Wastewater Treatment Plant to meet impending strict federal guidelines. Bacteria in the marsh destroy pollutants. It's less of an issue now because the water meets all standards when it exits the treatment plant, program manager Alice Brawley-Chesworth said.

The project will also help with flood control. The corps will start building a levee this fall to protect homes north of the project.

Alfalfa farmer Adron Reichert, who lives on 107th Avenue, said there have been four floods since the 1970s. They damaged his house and forced him to flee without much warning, he said.

The levee should stop such floods.

Bird watchers are also fans of Tres Rios.

Robert Witzeman, conservation chairman for the Maricopa Audubon Society, said it used to be tougher to see water birds.

"For years and years, we birders have always looked through cyclone fences or obtained permission and keys from wastewater treatment plants," Witzeman said.

The Tres Rios demonstration area is a great place to teach beginning birders because it's public, secure and there are a lot of birds, especially ones that are rare in the Valley, he said.

City workers also have learned a lot from the demonstration wetlands.

A puddle can attract mosquitoes, so imagine how many of the insects the hundreds of acres of swampy water can attract. City workers experimented and found the best way to control mosquitoes is to use a protein that kills the larvae and to populate the area with fish. The guppy-like gambusia fish gobble larvae.

Beavers are also a surprising pest in the wetlands. The bucktoothed creatures down the newly planted trees, stop up the water and burrow through soil dikes and islands.

City workers have tried many techniques to control them, including lights and retraining the beavers to eat other food. Researchers are studying the beavers' breeding habits.

Researchers have tried different plants to make sure they have a good mix that won't all die at the same time. For example, they found they needed to use a different type of bulrush that can tolerate deeper water.

Brawley-Chesworth said the most expensive part of the project is buying the land, paying for earthmoving equipment and building the pump station. The federal government, the Maricopa County Flood Control District and four Valley cities that use the wastewater treatment plant will help pay for the project.

About one-quarter of the Tres Rios Project is on Gila River Indian Community land. That part of the project will require a separate budget and an agreement between Phoenix and the Indian Community.